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Post-War Causes of Labor Unrest

By MALCOLM KEIR

PROPHECY is a hazardous enterprise, not only because the conditions upon which predictions are made so often shift, but also because what can be foreseen may be forestalled. In these fast-moving times, what is prophecy in November, when this is written, may be history in January, when it is read. It is with diffidence then that there are here set down a few of the factors in war industry that seem to portend labor problems. What appear to be among the most obvious elements of future unrest are the control of the government over industry; the administration of organized labor; the entrance of women into new types of work; the ban of the "color line"; the policy toward immigration; and the adjustments to war-made improvements in machinery.

At the beginning of the war, after the government had assumed rigid control over fuel, raw material, and quality, quantity or variety of product, it discovered that output of imperatively necessary articles was vitally hampered by the friction between employers and employes upon long-standing issues regarding hours, working conditions, wages and the rights to organize. It became the duty of the federal authorities to prescribe the internal policies of private business in order that the war program might go forward at full speed. The procurement divisions of the army and navy inserted stipulations in their contracts that established labor's long cherished principle of the eight-hour day with extra pay for overtime and double pay for holidays; granted the privilege of collective bargaining; assumed the right to select arbitrators; and insisted upon the formal adjustment of grievances. Boards, commissions and departmental divisions were created to preserve amicable industrial relations. For the most part these bodies went beyond the contract provisions by defining and upholding legitimate collective labor activities and enforcing their decisions by the threat to cancel contracts or commandeer plants.

These drastic measures were supported by public opinion, and

accepted for the most part in a patriotic spirit by employers; but no reform so sweeping could hope to win universal approval. Since the contract was the basis for the new labor regulation, some Chicago manufacturers tried to escape by first securing the award of a contract but purposely neglecting to sign it until the work was completed, a quibble that was unavailing but nevertheless significant of an underlying purpose to thwart labor dominance. A case involving the Smith & Wesson Co., of Springfield, Mass., wherein an award of the War Labor Board so upset long established customs in the plant that the officers preferred to lose their works through commandeering rather than submit, is typical of the attitude of a considerable number of conservative establishments toward outside interference in their business. On the whole, however, the government's war labor policies met with little opposition.

But men who willingly supported the government during war may not be so compliant in peace. Possibly some one will contest the whole regulatory program, and it is doubtful if our federal machinery for the conduct of war-industry could bear the microscopic examination of the law. A court might have difficulty in establishing the validity of the boards operating in Washington or of labor improvements enforced through a contract where a man had no choice but to sign. Such legal battles are likely to be attended by labor troubles because neither employers nor employees will yield their supposed rights or privileges without attempting coercion. Then, too, men who submitted to necessity during war but whose prejudices against labor were magnified by the petty tyranny incidental to the suddenness of labor's power, will fight against the retention during peace of any part of the war labor program. One influential officer of a great clothing concern said recently: "I am sick of the daily demands of labor committees or union leaders. *I am looking for the day when I can see a million men outside my office begging work: then we can teach labor some sense.*" For that man—and all of his type—labor controversy is inevitable. It is also clear why all such men will try to do their utmost to sever private business from public supervision.

Government control of industry, however, can hardly terminate with the war. A laissez-faire policy would result in the over-

production of some articles and the lack of others, with a consequent loss of materials, profits and labor. But if the government steers industry back into peace it will be forced to finance many concerns wrenched far out of their customary routine by the war. By its control of the purse the federal authority may also demand continued concurrence in the labor policies inaugurated during the war. If firms whose financial standing enabled them to readjust without assistance opposed the government's labor standards, agreement might be reached by the government's refusal of raw materials until the standards were acknowledged.

So long too as the War Department has millions of men under its discipline and must devise a method of release that will be fair to men and industry alike, the continued government control of industry is necessary. The danger of simultaneous demobilization is so obvious that it is little likely to arise, but a gradual demobilization will be only a little less disastrous if the ex-soldiers are not discharged into a job instead of onto the street. The government must become a great employment manager; it has the records of each soldier's capabilities; it has the machinery for making use of this knowledge in the draft boards or the United States Employment Service; all it needs is accurate information as to where the labor can be most effectively applied. These facts can best be obtained if the government itself prescribes what shall be produced, where, by whom and in what quantities or qualities. The government in coöperation with states and cities might also provide "buffer employment" upon public work held up by the war but for which funds have been provided. If the government does assume the functions of a great employment manager, then it could easily lay down the terms upon which labor could be secured and retained, thus assuring to labor the privileges gained during the war. If it carries over into peace its war labor policies, it will discover prolific seeds of discord in its attempts to standardize wages and to extend the scope of the United States Employment Service.

It is expected that if wages were equal everywhere for the same work, competition would be confined to service, management and quality and not depend upon exploiting labor. The attempts to standardize wages during the war aroused protests from employers because they did not see any justice in forcing those in small

towns to meet the wage set by the higher costs of the city. Laborers, too, did not like to be pinned down to a standard in communities where they felt themselves strong enough to force wages to a high level. To these objections would be added the difficulty of setting up in peace time a standard product. In war the mills made the same articles, on the same specifications, for the same market, but the infinite variety of peace business would give ground for so many deviations in pay that a standard would be hard to set and harder to maintain and would probably become an ever present bone of contention.

During the war, the United States Employment Service was inaugurated to prevent excessive turnover of unskilled labor, and employers were compelled to use it exclusively. Since during the war the service could not entirely restrain manufacturers from enticing labor from each other, the first few months of peace will probably witness many more violations inasmuch as the incentive will be greater and the restraint less. This situation will produce its own measure of trouble. If in addition skilled labor is put under the service, the difficulty of determining the degrees and grades of skill will keep the storms going. There is a movement afoot also to make a physical examination a part of the Employment Service with the idea of better fitting people to their jobs. This reform when launched is certain to raise a whirlwind. Sentimentalists and organized labor will both oppose it; the former because they cannot bear to think of men being tested like metal—a foolish notion but popular nevertheless; the latter because they fear a physical test will be used by employers as a means of “blacklisting.” The service, however, is such an advance over private agencies that it ought to be aided to ride out all storms.

By no means all of the labor problems of peace are connected with the government control of industry; some are more intimately attached to organized labor. The conservative union leaders were in power during the war and rasped the radicals exceedingly by not taking a much fuller advantage of their position. The very success of unionism whetted the appetite of the radicals for extreme measures. Success, also, has bred autocracy. Certain leaders have become so dictatorial that their followers will seize the first chance to overthrow them. An attempt of this sort held up the shoe industry for weeks during the war, seriously

impairing the supply of shoes to the army. On the other hand, some local unions have so advanced in comfort and well-being that they resent the interference of national officers and chafe under restriction. Shipbuilders on the Pacific Coast and machinists in Bridgeport, Conn., were held in line in 1917 and 1918 only by the most drastic threats. The prestige of unionism is seriously impaired by such incidents, and whole localities are set in uproar. The germs of trouble are well sprouted within the unions and reconstruction controversies will provide an excellent culture for their growth, especially if the national officers are not strengthened by tacit or avowed government aid.

Organized labor, too, is not united into one universal federation. To be sure, the American Federation of Labor holds sway over most of the trades, but there are some notable exceptions. For example, in the clothing industry there are two organizations, namely the United Garment Workers, affiliated with the American Federation, and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, a secessionist group of considerable strength. Before the war the feeling between these two was such that when war broke out it was impossible to set up in the clothing industry a board of mediation—as was done in other trades—having upon it a union representative. During the war the feud was not abated. Unless the breach is closed by a new policy of conciliation or unless changes in officials open the way for peaceful reunion, bitter clashes between these two unions cannot be avoided. Manufacturers also will not be averse to taking whatever advantage accrues to them by reason of this disaffection, adding fuel to an already surcharged flame.

Unions and labor in general, during the war, became so intent on wages that they forced themselves into an untenable position. Although wages must always advance with the cost of living regardless of production, nevertheless even with rising costs of living there comes a point in the rapid uptrend of wages beyond which further increases cannot be granted unless offset by greater service. Unfortunately war wages were not always accompanied by a production that warranted the price paid. For example, girls with little training were paid fifteen dollars a day or more for making overseas caps; cantonment builders received about twenty dollars a day; certain coal miners drew twenty-two dollars

a day;—yet in each case the workers struck for even higher returns. In each instance the employers complained that the increases in wages were followed by a *fall* in production. Labor must learn that extraordinary wages must be *earned*, for no employer can long afford to pay more for a service than he gets out of it. Certain economists might support the labor on the ground that the high wages come out of a surplus which belongs to the man who can get it; formerly swelling profits, it now inflates wages. The trouble is that we cannot compute the exact size of the surplus, and cannot estimate the relation between surplus and production per man. At any rate we can expect manufacturers to fight for their accustomed profits, and labor to struggle to hold its grip on a fat pay envelope.

The war gave us new practices in regard to government control and intensified many of the problems connected with unionism, but in no place did it so completely upset preconceived notions as in the field of women's work. The war gave the finishing blow to the old tradition that woman's only place was in the home. Our grandfathers saw the first attack on the fallacy when a few women tried to get a higher education and gain a career; our fathers witnessed the fall of the barriers that excluded girls from business positions; and now we mark the downfall of the custom that kept married women from gainful occupation. The "newest woman" does not make a choice between a husband and a career but wants both. The war-time employer having exhausted every other source of labor turned to the married women and appealed to their patriotism, their pocketbooks or their zeal for feminine advancement to get them to fill the gaps in industry. Special buildings, welfare work, machinery and hours were arranged in order that married women could coördinate their functions as homebuilders and breadwinners. Day nurseries, for example, were set up in the Connecticut brass and munitions districts in towns that had never heard of them before, and the American Woolen Co., of Lawrence, Mass., went further in granting recess twice a day to mothers during which they could go to the nearby nurseries and play with their own children. Neither employers nor mothers and wives will want to forego the advantages that this new employment grants. Given an opportunity it has been shown that sex is no more the determinant of what occupation a

woman should hold than it is in the case of men. *For both men and women the choice is a matter of individuals.* If this idea is accepted it means a great accretion to the labor force of the United States, and therein lies the kernel of trouble and the real cause for much false solicitude for the welfare of women workers.

Probably the immediate struggle against women's continued participation in industry will not involve positions requiring high degrees of skill or long training, but rather those formerly occupied by semi-skilled or unskilled men. Since many partly incapacitated soldiers will also be seeking this same type of work, much clamor may be raised to oust the women. If men fail in their selfish claims for priority they will then in all likelihood shift their attack to wages and try to compel employers to pay the same rates for the same work irrespective of the sex of the employee. Between these two campaigns the woman question bids fair to be the center of industrial dispute for some time to come.

Another social change instigated by the war and having as direct a relation to labor problems as the "woman question" is the industrial emancipation of negroes. Heretofore there has been little mingling of the white and colored peoples upon the same jobs, but the war gave the colored folk an unusually favorable opportunity. They advanced the argument that they had been thorough Americans for more generations than many of their white fellow-citizens; they paid taxes, bought bonds, supported war charities and gave their best sons in sacrifice to the war; they were good enough to die for their country so they ought to be good enough to work for it. This argument plus a vital need for every person willing to labor led to placing negroes in offices in responsible clerical positions and in shops at high grade machine work. The yoke that had held negroes in bondage to unskilled labor was at last lifted. It will require much sophistry to persuade negroes that they must give up their new jobs to white men or women when the war is over. Labor unions must face the issue of including negroes in their ranks and white workers must learn that democracy has a place in the factory or office as well as in international debate. Prejudice is so strong, however, that the negroes cannot hold their new found freedom without many a struggle and many a heartache. The battle in the industrial arena may be carried again into politics because having gained economic

equality the negroes may demand the political rights guaranteed by the constitution.

One of the great contributing factors to labor's power during the war was the shutting off of immigration. Enjoying its virtual monopoly, American labor will endeavor to continue it by seeking restrictive measures against immigrants. On the other hand employers will exert their power to regain a constant flow of immigrants, thereby hoping to loosen labor's throttle grip. This question must be threshed out in the near future here in America, but whatever action we take may be offset by conditions at the source of immigration. Legal restriction of emigration may counterbalance a free welcome at our ports. Economic conditions at home, greater opportunity or burdensome taxation may constrict or swell the volume of the human current pouring through our gates. If the stream is checked at its source American employers may look to new recruiting points. For example, 10,000 Porto Ricans were brought into the United States and 30,000 more were enrolled to come for construction work during the war; thousands of Mexicans were drawn into the mines of the Southwest and Chinese were imported to the Pacific states. If this type of immigration is encouraged because the older springs are dried up, a whole series of new problems confront us. Our relations with Porto Rico are already complicated by the complaint of planters against the withdrawal of their labor.

Causes for unrest lie in the relations between organized government and individual employes and employers, between organized government and organized labor, between men and women in industry, between white and black, and between native and alien labor units. As a final factor, machinery enters once more as an element in labor problems. Whatever forces tend to make labor scarce and high priced directly further the utilization of machinery. The Civil War was largely responsible for popularizing farm machinery and was the immediate cause for putting shoe manufacture upon a machine basis. Likewise, our latest war acted as a marked stimulus toward improving mechanical equipment. For illustration, the use of machines in mining was greatly advanced; mechanical conveyors replaced labor in many industries; machines were simplified and made more nearly automatic to permit women and untrained men to operate them.

By raising the price of labor and increasing labor turnover, the war rendered machinery economical, and by the enlarged profits of war business or by governmental underwriting, manufacturers were enabled to afford new machines. Since the labor scarcity made wages high even to operators of highly perfected machinery, the usual objection of labor to improvements was lacking. Even if wages fall now that war is over, the machines will stay in place because the capital charges have been defrayed and even the cheapest labor cannot compete with a free machine. Inasmuch as the machines have been perfected so they may be operated by a lower grade of labor, when the former skilled men come back for their jobs many will discover that theirs have vanished. This can hardly fail to arouse animosity and make the adjustment to peace doubly difficult. The strife over women in industry will also be intensified by the new machinery, because the inventions have made women available for work that formerly was exclusively masculine.

The whole reconstruction problem relative to labor is complicated by the question of politics. The degree of government control over industry will depend somewhat upon which party is in power; and the final disposition of the issues of organized labor, women in industry, negro uplift, immigration and the full use of advances in mechanism, will be contingent upon whether Republicans or Democrats hold the reins. In any event we will all need to exercise restraint, forbearance and wisdom in the labor problems that surely confront us in the days now at hand.